



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 14

Issue 2 *Women and Gender in the Middle East:
Recognition, Reflection, and Realignment*

Article 1

Mar-2013

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Recommended Citation

Wiggins, Sarah and Al-Obaidi, Jabbar (2013). Introduction: Women and Gender in the Middle East: Recognition, Reflection, and Realignment: A Bridgewater State University Conference. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 14(2), 1-2.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol14/iss2/1>

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Introduction: Women and Gender in the Middle East: Recognition, Reflection, and Realignment: A Bridgewater State University Conference

By Sarah Wiggins¹ and Jabbar Al-Obaidi²

Issues concerning the roles and rights of women in the region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are not only peculiar, but also have been the subject of research for some time. Nor are researchers and their critiques always free to address the regulations, laws or social and cultural practices that govern and shape their lives. In male-dominated societies such as in the MENA, women find themselves surrounded by others, mostly men of religious, tribal, and traditional power, who have granted themselves the right to think, act, and make decisions on behalf of women in the region. Over the last five decades, these typical practices of controlling have further deepened the lines of segregation between men and women. A prominent issue in denying or undermining the roles and rights of women is ignorance, or simply put, stereotypes and prejudices. It is as if many believe that the "law of God" in the eyes of these extreme conventional authorities could not be implemented, but through the oppression of women. Moreover, these forces advocate the supremacy of myths and traditions over modern social life, science, and the economy. Hence, this special issue focuses on women and gender in the Middle East as one effort among many to intervene on these positions and encourage dialog and liberatory transformation around these issues.

The essays that comprise this issue are inspired by papers that were delivered at the conference, *Women and Gender in the Middle East: Recognition, Reflection, and Realignment*. The conference was held in June 2012, and was hosted by Bridgewater State University in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. This meeting resulted from the efforts of Bridgewater State University's Middle East Studies Program and the Women's and Gender Studies Program. These two programs recognize and embody the significance of interdisciplinarity, and it proved both essential and timely energy to join forces in an effort to highlight the status of women in the Middle East and North Africa. Since gender issues in the MENA region reside at the forefront of scholarly conversation, participants in these programs at Bridgewater State University supported a platform for dialogue.

The *Women and Gender in the Middle East Conference* brought together voices from around the globe, including male and female colleagues from Jordan, Oman, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Iranian participants proved unable to travel to the United States

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to join the conversation, providing a reminder of the continued need for an open, scholarly, and international exchange of ideas. With a variety of perspectives from men and women of different nations, this meeting was not simply relegated to the Western perspective on the position of women in the Middle East. The conference also introduced a breadth of subjects relating to gender. Participants addressed the realities and potentials for women and leadership, along with the relationship among feminism, Islam, and gender equity. Women's legal status was discussed, as was their relationship with social media, marriage, and the educational systems. The position of Jordanian women was emphasized with panels that focused on women's voices, domestic violence, and body image. The conversation also confronted the questions that have arisen in relation to the status of women and the outcomes of the Arab Spring.

Many functional arguments were advanced by the participants. Researchers from Jordan argued that organizing a conference abroad has the potential to empower women in MENA by allowing them to write with more freedom and to express themselves free of fear and censorship. The participants agreed that gender boundaries were negotiated at the conference and provided an interface between researchers from, for example, the United States and their colleagues from the MENA region. There were some intellectual challenges, nevertheless, and they were either contested, argued over or inspired researchers to do more investigation and analysis. The main recommendation, however was to open more opportunities for intellectual and educational interaction between researchers, who are interested in pursuing the conversation on these important and critical issues of gender and women in the Middle East and North Africa.

The articles in this issue offer a variety of approaches to the issue of women and gender in the Middle East, and present subjects such as economic agency, feminism, media, reproductive rights, and the Arab Spring. Alida Gomez demonstrates how microcredit lending for women functions in the region as a path for entrepreneurship and assesses how it can be linked to female empowerment. Nabila Ramdani explores the intersection between feminism and nationalism during the 1919 Egyptian Revolution by tracing the history of feminism in Egypt and highlighting the role(s) that women played during this event. Jennifer McCleary-Sills illustrates the relationships among intimate partner violence, reproductive choice, and family planning among Jordanian women, while B.K. Amel Mili discusses the Arab Spring and takes a closer look at the developments in Tunisia in order to contemplate how steps towards democracy can possibly influence the status of women. The combination of these essays encapsulates the spirit of the *Women and Gender in the Middle East Conference* and extends the dialogue to a larger audience with the publication of this special issue.

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